

Ithacans voice concerns with NY fracking

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As the Department of Environmental Conservation begins to conclude its review on the impacts of horizontal hydraulic fracturing, community members came together to voice their concerns about the controversial process.

Emily DeSantis, assistant director of public information and spokesperson for the DEC, said horizontal fracking permits will not be issued until the DEC has completed its investigation of fracking safety.

The Supplemental Generic Environmental Impact Statement is a continuation of the original report released in 2009. A significant change in this new draft, released in September, is a fracking ban within the watersheds of New York City and Syracuse. The report includes research pertaining to environmental, health, economic and other factors impacted by the potential introduction of natural gas drilling in New York state.

DeSantis said public comments will be reviewed and integrated into the report, a final draft is expected in 2012.

“We carefully review all of the comments that we receive, and actually the comments we got from 2009 helped inform our revised draft,” DeSantis said. “We made significant improvements to the proposal.”

The comment period was extended to January in response to requests for more time to review the document.

Members of the Ithaca and Greater Finger Lakes communities expressed their criticism of the report at a public hearing downtown held Dec. 1 at the State Theatre, sponsored by the Tompkins County Council of Governments.

Dominic Frongillo, a member of the Town Council of Caroline and TCCOG, was the moderator for the event. Frongillo said the hearing was organized to provide a forum for local citizens not offered by the DEC. The nearest department-sponsored hearings were held in Binghamton and Dansville.

The line to speak stretched for close to half a mile. TCCOG allotted enough time for at least 70 speakers.

Most of the community harshly criticized the DEC’s 1,537-page review, with some speakers asking for a complete and permanent fracking moratorium by the DEC. Others requested significantly more research and time to be spent before a decision on fracking is made.

Vertical fracking already occurs in the state and is not restricted by the moratorium. Horizontal drilling can use 100 times as much water as vertical fracking and can stretch into the shale as deep as two miles.

Speaking on behalf of Rep. Maurice Hinchey, D-N.Y., Dan Lamb, a district representative, said the congressman supports a statewide ban or home rule in which local governments choose whether to allow fracking. He said there have been incidents of pollution and contamination that have gone unreported since the DEC's previous study that are not yet reflected in the revision.

"We have learned much more about hydraulic fracturing since 2009," Lamb said. "More incidents of broken industry promises, harm to local communities, air pollution and water contamination have been reported."

About 40 people from Ithaca College joined the local community at the rally, as nearly a dozen students supported a rally on the Commons before the hearing.

Junior Ren Ostry, a member of Occupy IC and Occupy Ithaca, helped lead the rally. She said the Occupy Ithaca movement held the rally to stand in solidarity with those protesters opposed to fracking.

Ostry said the City of Ithaca has become her home, and she wanted to show her support and listen to what local residents are thinking and feeling about fracking.

"These are my community members," Ostry said. "Tonight, they're all anti-fracking, but whether they agree or disagree with me, this is my community. The whole purpose of this is to value people over profits, and I want to hear what they have to say."

Sandra Steingraber, distinguished scholar-in-residence in the college's Department of Environmental Studies and Sciences, said the environmental health problems associated with fracking were largely absent in the DEC report.

"Rather than assess the health impacts of fracking using the protocols of public health science, the SGEIS simply denies that these impacts exist," Steingraber said.

Concerns ranged from health and environment to the economy, but one consistent theme remained — the people of Ithaca and the Finger Lakes region who attended the event did not find the DEC report to be acceptable, and they will continue to fight fracking in the area.

DeSantis said the final draft will be the regulation natural gas companies must abide by if they are to pursue horizontal fracking in New York state.

"The driller would have to comply with the requirements of the SGEIS as well as the regulations that go along with it," DeSantis said.

<http://theithacan.org/19047>